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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews some of the recent literature about adult female students at community colleges. Their motivations, unique needs, and barriers to entry are discussed, as well as ways institutions can enhance the educational experience for adult women. Female students have outnumbered male students in higher education for nearly 30 years. In 1997, women comprised 55% of undergraduate students and almost 58% of the students at community colleges. About half of the female student population is adult women age 25 years or older. Researchers found that adult women students are often motivated to return to school after the loss of a job, divorce, death of a spouse, or career limitations due to lack of education. Many adult women pursue their community college studies on a part-time basis for reasons such as family obligations, the need to work for economic security, and child care concerns. A primary challenge and source of stress for adult women students comes from the multiple and sometimes conflicting roles they must play in their daily lives. Increased awareness of the stresses, challenges, and additional responsibilities faced by adult re-entry women can be helpful to administrators and student services personnel interested in providing a supportive environment. Contains 13 references. (JA)

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Digest

January, 2001 EDO-JC-01-01

Adult Women in Community Colleges

By Janene White

Female students have outnumbered male students in higher education for nearly 30 years. In 1997, women comprised 55% of undergraduate students and almost 58% of the students at community colleges (Phillippe, 2000). About half of the female student population is adult women age 25 years or older. Over 1.6 million adult women attend community colleges, about 25% of the total student body (Phillippe, 2000). This digest reviews some of the recent literature about adult female students at community colleges. Their motivations, unique needs, and barriers to entry are discussed, as well as ways institutions can enhance the educational experience for adult women.

Why Do Adult Women Enroll in Community Colleges?

Adult students typically enter higher education for work-related goals and family responsibilities. Johnson, Schwartz and Bower (2000) found that adult women students are often motivated to return to school after the "loss of a job, divorce, death of a spouse, and career limitations due to lack of education" (p. 291). Oftentimes the impetus for adult women to return to school is a personal, life-changing event. Changes such as children leaving the home or divorce have been documented as influencing adult women's desire to reenter higher education (Mohney and Anderson, 1988).

About three-fourths of adult women are enrolled on a part-time basis (Phillippe, 2000). Women pursue their community college studies on a part-time basis for a number of reasons, including family obligations, the need to work for economic security, and child care concerns. Griffith and Connor (1994) note that for community college students, "attendance behaviors...are more dependent on their personal lives, their job lives, the outside world, than on anything happening within the college" (p. 20). The increase in divorce rates in recent years, as well as the high number of single-parent households headed by women, has led many adult women to view the community college as a good way to further their education and achieve greater economic security and a better standard of living for themselves and their children (Herideen, 1998).

The desire to enter the work force or to improve current job situations is an important factor in adult women's decision to return to school (Read, Elliott, Escobar, & Slaney, 1988). This is especially important for divorced women returning to higher education (MacKinnon-Slaney, Barber & Slaney, 1988). The need to contribute to the family income or to gain financial independence is another reason adult women return to higher education (Holliday, 1985). In a literature review, Padula (1994) found that in all studies, vocational factors were an important source of motivation for adult women returning to higher education.

Role Conflict of Adult Women

A primary challenge and source of stress for adult women students comes from the multiple and sometimes conflicting roles they must play in their daily lives. Mohney and Anderson (1988) found that role demands – family responsibilities in addition to career or job demands, are a major obstacle for returning women, and often impede their successful adaptation of the additional role of student. Based on a survey of 119 reentry women 25 years of age and older, Read et al. (1988) suggested that the multiple roles of wife, mother, employee, may lead to discomfort or even feelings of guilt about adopting the additional role of student.

In a survey of 350 adult female students, Johnson, Schwartz, and Bower (2000) found that 84% of the women were responsible for children in the home and suggested that "one of the most pressing concerns among students who are parents is child care" (p. 292). Child care facilities on campus offer a highly valuable resource for these students. Fadale and Winter (1991) reported similar findings in their study of New York community colleges. In their study, 500 student parents, 95% of whom were female, stated that the campus child care facilities contributed not only to their academic success, but also to their continued enrollment and persistence.

Recommendations for Community College Practice

The unique characteristics and experiences of this nontraditional female population result in support and counseling needs that differ from those of traditional age college students. Increased awareness of the stresses, challenges, and additional responsibilities faced by adult re-entry women can be helpful to administrators and student services personnel interested in providing a supportive environment.

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Campus-Based Support Network

Considering the circumstances surrounding the adult woman's decision to return to school, providing a support network is another programmatic effort that may ease the transition and encourage these women to continue their studies. An orientation program for this population is one way to introduce adult women to the campus and other similar students, as well as publicize support services for this specific population (Johnson, Schwartz & Bower, 2000) suggested. McClary (1990) suggested that instruction in relaxation techniques and stress management can be helpful in easing the transition to education. Because adult women typically return to the community college during transitional or vulnerable stages in their lives, and oftentimes must maintain additional responsibilities related to other role demands, a support network is especially important.

Career Development

Career development for reentry women students at the community college is another area where programming efforts may be helpful, particularly in light of the importance of vocational considerations in the adult woman's decision to return to college. Healy and Reilly (1989) surveyed nearly 3000 students from 10 California community colleges in an analysis of the career counseling needs of community college students. Results indicate that although students of all ages need career exploration assistance, the ways students go about investigating various opportunities may differ for traditional age students versus adult students. Given the additional role demands facing adult women, this is especially important and administrators must closely examine the services to ensure the needs of this population are not ignored.

Child-Care Facilities

Given the large number of women students who are responsible for children, providing a safe place for children while the mother is on campus could alleviate some of the stress of going to school. Research presented in this paper illustrates the significance of child-care issues in the lives of adult female students. Alleviating this as a concern could provide additional encouragement for this population to persist in their academic pursuits. Federal funds for campus child care centers are available through the Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools program. Through this $25 million program, colleges are eligible for grants of up to one percent of the Pell Grant dollars awarded to their students (Yachnin, 2001).

Conclusion

The community college is the principal educational resource for adult re-entry women, and this population makes up a large portion of the student body at these institutions. As a result, community college leaders need to be aware of the experiences and context in which reentry women are coming to back to school, and provide support services and programs based on their specific needs to encourage their persistence.

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